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***Steelhead-Eating Sea Lions All But Gone from Seattle's Ballard Locks***

Life got just a little easier for adult steelhead heading back through the fish ladder at Seattle's Ballard Locks to spawn this year, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service. The federal fisheries agency says the number of steelhead eaten this season by sea lions at the locks is exactly zero, and, with season almost over, it's unlikely to go any higher.

The Ballard Locks, which control access to Lake Washington, were notorious for sea lion predation just a few years ago, with several aggressive sea lions, some weighing upwards of 1,000 pounds, consuming scores of the legendary sport fish every year as they made their spawning run between January and mid-May.

This year not one sea lion has been observed eating a steelhead. In fact, since January, when state observers began monitoring the locks, sea lions have been seen at the locks for less than two hours.

The fisheries service removed three of the most blatant steelhead-eating sea lions in 1996 to a permanent home at Sea World in Orlando, Fla. Since then, according to Joe Scordino, the agency's acting deputy administrator, things have only gotten better.

"It looks like the primary reason for our success is our decision to permanently remove the most troublesome sea lions three years ago," he said. "One of those animals had been returning to the locks every year since 1989 to eat steelhead."

The key to that success, says Scordino, was the determination to target only those few sea lions that were known to cause most of the predation.

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According to Scordino, after years of unsuccessful attempts by the fisheries service and Washington's Department of Fish and Wildlife to drive the problem sea lions away -- using firecrackers, barrier nets, rubber-tipped arrows, foul-tasting fish, even trucking some to California -- a change in the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1994 allowed sea lions known to be harming steelhead to be targeted for "permanent removal."

Things got so bad that by 1994, only 70 steelhead made it past the locks to spawn. Historically, Lake Washington's steelhead run was typically 2,500 fish a year. Final estimates for this year's run aren't available yet, although it's likely to be smaller than the 1998 figure of more than 500 returning adults.

Although the changes to the federal law provided for killing problem animals, the three sea lions removed in 1996 were shipped to Sea World, following the aquarium's offer to install the animals in its Florida facility.

Last month, responding to a three-year-old suit brought by the Humane Society of the U.S., a federal district court upheld the fisheries service decision to selectively remove problem sea lions at the locks, using lethal means if necessary.

"The virtual absence of sea lions -- and our court victory -- confirm that the agency made the right decision," commented Scordino.

"Although we observed many sea lions near the Ballard Locks, in Shillshole Bay, very few -- perhaps no more than a dozen all told -- ever came up to the dam and ate steelhead," Scordino explained.

"The problem was never sea lions in general," he added. "The problem has always been a few sea lions in particular."

Earlier this year, the fisheries service sent a report to Congress recommending changes to the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The suggested changes would facilitate "lethal removal" of problem sea lions and seals along the West Coast, when it can be demonstrated that predation is threatening salmon or steelhead runs. The report also asks Congress to consider reinstating the authority, removed from the federal law in 1994, that allows for certain fishermen at specific sites and seasons to kill a seal or sea lion to protect his catch or gear if the animal cannot be otherwise deterred. The Congress, which is scheduled to reauthorize the act this year, is expected to hold hearings on the issue later this year.

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